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THE ANN ARBOR NEWS

Family's 2nd fire leads to probe

Mother, children escaped deadly fire in January then had another fire in March

Friday, April 06, 2007

BY SUSAN L. OPPAT

News Staff Reporter

A mother who lost her toddler in a January house fire is apparently under investigation by the state's Child Protective Services over a second kitchen fire, during which authorities say her surviving three children couldn't wake her.

Washtenaw County Sheriff's Cmdr. David Egeler said his department is not seeking criminal charges against Latasha Wingard in the second fire because the state Department of Human Services was asked by a social worker at St. Joseph Mercy Hospital to investigate the matter. Wingard was treated at the hospital after the second fire.

Department of Human Services spokeswoman Maureen Sorbet would not confirm Child Protective Services had been called in to investigate Wingard, because those records are sealed. But Washtenaw Juvenile Court Administrator Linda Edwards-Brown said no neglect petitions had been filed. Sorbet said none would be filed if Wingard temporarily gave custody of her girls, ages 8, 6 and 4, to other family members.

Wingard could not be reached for comment, and her attorney, Douglas Shapiro, did not return several calls.

According to Ypsilanti Township Fire Department and county sheriff's records released under the Freedom of Information Act, a couple living next to a townhouse at 667 Villa Drive heard a smoke detector alarm in that unit at 6:45 a.m. on March 16.

They told deputies they heard screaming and tried to open the door, but it was locked. The man told the children inside to open the door, and said two of the girls ran out. He said the third was on a couch with her mother, "trying to wake her up."

Deputies said the neighbor reported that Wingard "appeared to be unconscious or was passed out." He tried to wake her but, when that failed, carried her out to his car, he said.

Deputy Kris Wittlinger wrote in her report that Wingard "appeared confused, (was) belligerent and smelled strongly of intoxicants." She said Wingard refused to go to the hospital, and denied there was any smoke or fire. Wittlinger reported Wingard became combative, and her fingers had to be pried off of one daughter's arm.

Firefighters reported that they found oil in a pan on the stove, burned food, and a bag of frozen potatoes on the counter.

Wittlinger also reported that Wingard's boyfriend, Gerald Wyscaver, told her that "the stress of losing her son has caused her to become irrational at times." She said Wingard's sister told police Wingard had been drinking heavily since the toddler died.

On Jan. 31, 2-year-old Larry Hunter died in a fire that started in the kitchen of Wingard's rented house at 625 Fox Avenue in Ypsilanti Township.

Ypsilanti Township Fire Marshal Phil Stachlewitz said Wingard told him she was using the oven to heat the house because the furnace had failed. Firefighters found the oven door open, and a pan on the stove.

Wingard and her three older children escaped that fire but she and a passerby almost died when they ran back into the burning house to try to save the toddler.

The New West Willow Neighborhood Association and the older girls' school collected money, clothes and other necessities for the family after the fire.

Educational neglect charges were filed against Wingard in Washtenaw County Juvenile Court in March 2006, when school officials reported her two oldest children were not showing up for school. The case was closed in June 2006, according to court records.

Susan Oppat can be reached at soppat@annarbornews.com or 734-482-1166.

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THE ANN ARBOR NEWS

Near-drowning uncovered

Mother of 3 children killed in fire convicted in previous case

Friday, April 06, 2007

BY SUSAN L. OPPAT

News Staff Reporter

The mother of the three children killed in a February apartment fire was convicted four years ago of child neglect after her then 10-month-old son nearly drowned in the bathtub, newly released records show.

A 12-year-old girl pulled Christopher Barginere II, unconscious and not breathing, out of six inches of water, according to a Washtenaw County Sheriff's report of the 2002 incident released under a Freedom of Information Act request by The News. Tirenda Mitchell was convicted the next year of child neglect and placed on probation.

Christopher was one of the three children who perished in a Feb. 8 fire, which authorities said started after Mitchell left them alone in her Ypsilanti apartment with the stove burning.

Mitchell refused comment on either incident this week, but Pastor Cornelius Anthony Sr., of New Progressive Missionary Baptist in Ann Arbor, asked the community not to judge her.

"We should see what the courts are going to say," he said. "I don't think anyone in the community knows all the facts. She is going through quite a bit right now. Neglect or not neglect, she lost three children, and that has a lasting effect on anybody."

He said he was the children's pastor, and Mitchell, who is about seven months pregnant, has become active in the church since the fire. A rush to judgment, he said, "will damage her even further, and draw a conclusion that has not been drawn in a court of law."

According to the police report from the July 11, 2002 incident, Mitchell told a deputy that she left then-3-year-old Destiny Mitchell and her baby brother alone after she ran a bath in their Ypsilanti Township apartment. Deputy Kris Wittlinger in her report said Mitchell "was very vague, and appeared to be in shock."

"(Mitchell) said she had begun the bath about 'ten minutes ago.' She seemed unaware that she had been with me for the past 10 minutes," Wittlinger wrote in her report. "In addition, (Mitchell) was unable to tell me why she had left the bathroom. (Mitchell) then said that she performed CPR on Christopher on her bed. She was pumping his chest when he began vomiting."

The deputy said Mitchell told her that she had no telephone, so she put the children in the car and started driving around the apartment complex to look for her husband, but was spotted by deputies after four or five minutes.

Wittlinger reported she saw only one child seat in the car for the two younger children, and it was not properly secured. She said the apartment was disorganized, with laundry in nearly every room, and belongings all over the floor. She said Destiny had infections in both eyes.

Christopher was hospitalized, but recovered.

Mitchell was charged with two counts of second-degree child abuse, a formal charge that also encompasses neglect. She pleaded guilty to fourth-degree child abuse.

Destiny, 7, and Christopher, 5, along with 1-year-old Legend Lyle-Mitchell, died in the Feb. 8 fire at the Paradise Manor apartments on Michigan Avenue in Ypsilanti. Mitchell told Ypsilanti firefighters she left the children alone for a few minutes while she went to borrow an ingredient for dinner from a neighbor.

Ypsilanti Fire Chief Jon Ichesco said a stove control knob was melted in the "on" position, and a pot had burned until it broke in two. The fire destroyed the six-unit building, leaving Mitchell and four other families homeless.

Area residents and businesses took up collections to bury the children and provide items for the other families, collecting \$27,063.55 by the time Washtenaw County, which ran the fund, closed it last week.

Police turned the results of their investigation into the fire over to the county prosecutor this week.

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04/06/2007

Convicted abuser seeking a new trial

BY VICTOR SKINNER

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TRAVERSE CITY — A convicted child abuser could get a new trial after a state appellate court ruled his original attorney may have been ineffective.

Phillip Jon Fahrner, 30, will appear at a rare Sunday hearing on April 15 before 13th Circuit Court Judge Thomas Power to determine if Fahrner's original attorney failed to present relevant evidence at his 2005 trial.

A jury convicted Fahrner of first-degree child abuse and Power sentenced the Williamsburg man to nine to 15 years in prison for physically abusing his live-in girlfriend's 11-month-old son while she worked.

**Fahrner**

Fahrner told police he threw the infant, Cameron Strang, on his head in the kitchen when the child repeatedly spit up milk. Strang spent three weeks at DeVos Children's Hospital with brain damage and paralysis and nearly died.

In Fahrner's motion for a new trial, he argued that his trial attorney, Jeffrey Slocombe, caused "irreparable prejudice" to his case. Slocombe allegedly did not provide evidence to contradict the prosecution's expert witnesses who testified the child's injuries were not accidental, court records show.

"Appellate counsel's investigation demonstrates that there were serious problems with the prosecution's medical and scientific evidence which were not presented in trial court," Fahrner's motion stated. "Had the evidence been presented to a jury, there is a reasonable probability that a different result would have occurred."

Grand Traverse County Prosecutor Alan Schneider believes jurors would have convicted Fahrner whether or not the defense provided their own expert testimony.

"The trial judge will have to determine if there was a mistake made by the defense counsel. Was there a reasonable likelihood that the outcome would have been different," Schneider said. "From our point of view the medical evidence in this case was substantial. Given that, and the context that these injuries occurred, I find it doubtful that the jury would have reached a different conclusion than they did."

Fahrner's appellate attorney, Mark A. Satawa, could not be reached for comment.

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Mom, 2 men jailed in girl's underage sex

April 6, 2007

BY DAN CORTEZ

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

It was less than a year ago when a 13-year-old Harrison Township girl made national headlines after she passed herself off as an 18-year-old on her sexually provocative MySpace page. That led a 25-year-old man to drive from Indiana to meet her.

Eleven months later, the girl's 35-year-old mother is facing child abuse charges after Utica police say they discovered that she knew her daughter, who now is 14, was having sex at the family's Utica apartment with two 21-year-old men -- one of whom is a convicted sex offender.

The Free Press is not naming the woman to protect the identity of her daughter, who is pregnant for the third time after two miscarriages and is living in foster care.

The two men, Christopher M. Garcia and James E. Przeadzki, lived at the same two-bedroom apartment with the mother, her boyfriend and her daughter.

Garcia and Przeadzki each are charged with two counts of third-degree criminal sexual conduct. Garcia, who has a previous conviction for criminal sexual conduct in Macomb County, also is charged with failing to register as a sex offender. Przeadzki faces one count of fourth-degree criminal sexual conduct after police said he had sexual contact, which involved fondling, with a second 14-year-old girl in the same apartment.

The mother is charged with one count of second-degree child abuse and contributing to the delinquency of a minor.

The two men and the mother are being held in the Macomb County Jail on \$1 million bonds and are due back in 41A District Court in Shelby Township on April 17.

"I've learned that nothing surprises me anymore, but this one definitely surprised us," said Utica Detective Sgt. Dave Faber, a lead investigator on the case.

Police say they suspect the two men began having sex with the girl nearly a year ago with mother's knowledge. Faber said it is not known how she met the men. It is unknown whether one of the men impregnated the girl.

Word of the alleged activities first circulated through the middle school both girls attended, which led someone to call Child Protective Services and then Utica police. The second girl's father also called police after learning of the alleged sexual encounters.

Macomb County Sheriff Mark Hackel said Thursday that when deputies were looking for the girl last year, her mother withheld information -- including about her and her daughter's MySpace pages -- that would have helped investigators. He also said that his department found no evidence that the girl knew Garcia or Przeadzki at the time she met the 25-year-old online.

Also, when her daughter was recovered, Hackel said the mother didn't seem interested.

"When we brought the daughter back, we had to find mom," he said

The MySpace pages that appear to belong to the mother and her daughter were still up as of Thursday. The daughter had not logged into hers since May, while the mother logged on in February.

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FIVE THINGS: About child sexual abuse

April 6, 2007

BY ALEX CRUDEN

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

It's a difficult subject. But many are affected.

THE CRUELTY

The majority of child sexual abusers are family members.

"It's like a grooming they do. It starts out like a game ... tickling," says Kim, a woman who lives in metro Detroit and who was a victim.

"Then their hand goes somewhere else. ... As a child, you don't know what's going on. ... You don't know what's sexual abuse. ... And sometimes it feels good."

And so "you get mixed up. ... You think it's normal."

SECRET

A victimizer and a child can have what Kim calls "abusal bonding." They share a special experience, even though one is being damaged.

The situation becomes especially complicated if the abuser is a parent, sibling or other family member. Relatives are supposed to love and trust one another.

If there's a suggestion something is wrong, the victim often blames herself or himself and does not tell of the abuse.

The wounds are very deep and long-lasting.

PREVENTION

Listen, Kim says.

"If a child keeps saying, 'I don't want to go to so-and-so's house,' " or doesn't want to be alone with a certain person but doesn't really say why, that child could be trying to avoid more abuse.

THE ABUSER

Abusers often have enablers -- family members who don't confront the situation -- says Dr. Ken Adams of Royal Oak, author of the new book "When He's Married to Mom."

An abuser can stop if he or she will confront the distortion in his or her thinking, Adams says. Typical distortions are a sense of entitlement, or that the child doesn't mind or is too young to really be affected, or even that the child enjoys it.

To stop, the abuser must develop empathy for the victim and take responsibility. It can happen, Adams says.

HOW TO HELP

If you suspect child abuse or neglect, or are a victim, report it to your local police.

You also can contact the Child Abuse and Neglect Council of Oakland County at 248-332-7173. Trained counselors there can help and can point you to the right source for more assistance.

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April 6, 2007

MySpace mom's teen is pregnant

Police say mother let 14-year-old have sex with two men, who face criminal charges; woman is in jail.

Edward L. Cardenas / The Detroit News

UTICA -- The party's over for the mom who once called herself "Tammy Tokes" on a MySpace Web site and bragged about a life of drinking, pot smoking and debauchery.

The woman -- who gained national attention last year after her teenage daughter ran away with a man she met on MySpace -- is in jail on a \$1 million bond after police say she allowed the same daughter, now 14, to have sex with two men and become pregnant.

Now, the two men face criminal sexual conduct charges and the girl is in foster care.

Macomb County Sheriff Mark Hackel said he's not surprised by the recent turn of events. The mother's name is being withheld to protect her daughter's identity.

"We had a feeling if she didn't become more involved in her child's life in a different way, things weren't going to change," Hackel said. "We can't police what is going on in the home."

Police say the mom allowed the girl to have sex with Christopher Garcia and James Przeadzki, both 21, while living at Utica Manor apartments.

Child Protective Services found out about the girl's pregnancy and contacted Utica Police. Police said Przeadzki also had sex with the girl's friend, also 14, at the apartment.

"Garcia admitted to the sexual relationship. Przeadzki admitted to (sex with the pregnant girl) and sexual contact with the second 14-year-old girl," Utica Police Sgt. Dave Faber said. "Both advised us that the mom knew what was going on in the house."

The girl and her mom gained national attention last year when the then-13-year-old posed as an 18-year-old on MySpace.com, a social networking Web site, and set up a liaison with a 25-year-old man from Indiana. The pair was stopped in Jackson after an Amber Alert was issued for the girl. No charges were brought against the Indiana man.

The Macomb Sheriff's Office found the mother also had a MySpace account under the name "Tammy Tokes" that described her partying lifestyle. The site also linked to her daughter's site.

Garcia, who police say got the girl pregnant, is charged with two counts of third-degree criminal sexual conduct and one count of failing to register as a sex offender.

Przeadzki, who had sex with the girl and the girl's 14-year-old friend, is charged with two counts of third-degree criminal sexual conduct and one count of fourth-degree criminal sexual conduct.

The mother is charged with one count of second-degree child abuse and one count of contributing to the delinquency of a minor.

Macomb Assistant Prosecutor Molly Zappitell said Garcia and the girl were having a relationship since last year. He would pick her up from school, describing himself as her fiance around the school grounds, Zappitell said. She added that the mom knew Garcia was a registered sex offender.

Officials said they are not sure if the girl had been pregnant previously.

You can reach Edward L. Cardenas at (586) 468-0529 or ecardenas@detnews.com.

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Article published Apr 5, 2007

Woman accused of allowing 2 men to have sex with teen daughter

Associated Press

MOUNT CLEMENS — A suburban Detroit woman is accused of allowing two men to have sex with her 14-year-old daughter, who is pregnant for a third time.

The girl's mother is charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor and second-degree child abuse. She is being held on a \$1 million bond. Her name is not being used to protect the identity of her daughter.

Christopher Michael Garcia and James Edward Przeadzki, both 21, also are jailed on \$1 million bonds. They pleaded not guilty Tuesday to charges they had sex with the woman's daughter and another 14-year-old girl.

Garcia also was charged with failing to register as a convicted sex offender. Police said the girl was pregnant by him twice, but had two miscarriages. She is pregnant again.

The mother and the two men are scheduled for preliminary examinations on April 17.

The girl made headlines two years ago after fleeing to Indiana with a man she met on MySpace.com. The man told police he thought the girl was 18.

Information from: The Macomb Daily, <http://www.macombdaily.com>



Hearing waived

Friday, April 06, 2007

GRAND RAPIDS TOWNSHIP -- A suspect in a string of child sexual assaults waived a probable cause hearing Thursday on two charges. Jamie VanKlaveren, 26, remained in the Kent County Jail after his brief appearance before District Judge Sara Smolenski. The Wyoming man faces charges of third- and fourth-degree sexual assault in this case. Authorities say VanKlaveren is suspected of molesting up to 18 boys in Allegan and Kent counties. He has been charged in some of the Kent County cases, while Allegan County authorities continue to investigate.

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Bay City Man Sentenced For Sexually Abusing 12-Year-Old Girl

April 5, 2007 07:01 PM EDT

(TV5) -- In Bay City, 27-year-old John Leroy Murphy, Jr. has been sentenced for sexually abusing a 12-year-old child.

Murphy was released from an Otsego jail in June of 2005. He moved to Bay City where he molested the female victim for a period of 14 months. The girl told a trusted adult about the abuse in August of 2006.

"This child's strength and determination to overcome her abuser and disclose the abuse she had been suffering was crucial in bringing her molester to justice," said Bay County Prosecutor Kurt C. Asbury. "No child should ever have to endure what this child has endured."

Murphy was convicted of four counts of Third Degree Criminal Sexual Conduct. He was sentenced to 14 to 22 years in prison.



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Grant wrongful-death suit filed

Probate petition also is entered

April 6, 2007

BY CHRISTY ARBOSCELLO

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

While the Grant children cope with the painful revelations about their father's alleged role in their mother's death, their aunt filed a \$50-million wrongful death lawsuit against him.

Alicia Standerfer -- who was granted guardianship Monday of Tara Grant's estate and conservancy for her two children -- filed the civil suit Wednesday in Macomb County Circuit Court against Stephen Grant, 37. He is charged with killing and dismembering his 34-year-old wife.

To ensure Grant doesn't cash in on his spouse's life insurance policy, 401(k) plan or her half of their Washington Township home -- worth an estimated \$300,000 -- Standerfer also filed a petition the same day in Probate Court to revoke his right to her assets, said her lawyer, Patrick Simasko.

"The motivation behind it obviously is so he is left with nothing," Standerfer said Thursday.

A hearing for the probate issue is May 16.

Wayne State University law professor Peter Henning said a judge likely will postpone the civil case until the criminal matter ends because a conviction could justify financial damages and insurance claims.

The civil lawsuit alleges Stephen Grant is responsible for his wife's Feb. 9 death. It also says the couple's children and Tara Grant's relatives "have suffered a loss of affection, comfort, companionship, love, society, and financial support, help and service, of which the decedent was accustomed to give and would have given in the future but for her untimely demise."

Damages sought include funeral and burial expenses. Simasko acknowledged that collecting the full amount may be problematic, but a win means Stephen Grant can't profit from Tara Grant's death, as in a book deal.

Meanwhile, during a car ride to Ohio, where she is taking the children to live for now, Standerfer said the 4- and 6-year-olds are doing "as well as can be expected."

In a psychologist's presence, "they've been told both sides of the story, and they're dealing with it the best way that they can.

"They know obviously their mom is in heaven, and now they are also aware of their dad's involvement."

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Staff writer Amber Hunt contributed to this report.

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Preventing child abuse

Child abuse is wrong, horribly wrong.

Rational, intelligent humans do not argue this truth. It is understood.

Why, then, does child abuse occur?

It seems, at times, that drugs and alcohol appear to rule this planet. Weaker individuals, or individuals caught in a weak moment by effects of drugs and alcohol, do things they would not normally do.

They lose their temper, and lash out on the most helpless of humans — children.

Other individuals have been abused as children. They've come to believe that child abuse is a "normal" part of growing up.

Whatever the reason, child abuse does occur.

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month, a time to examine the problem, and some possible solutions.

Forms of child abuse include physical, emotion, sexual, and neglect.

Almost half of the confirmed child victims experience neglect, officials report.

Neglect is failure to provide for a child's basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, medical care, education, or proper supervision.

Other types of abuse include physical, sexual, and emotion abuse.

The impact of child abuse and neglect is far greater than its immediate, visible effects.

The experience of abuse can shape child development and have consequences that last years and even lifetimes.

Research shows that the physical, psychological, and behavioral consequences of child abuse and neglect impact not just the child and family but the entire community.

In the United States, nearly five children die each day from abuse and neglect.

Since 1993, child abuse and neglect reports have increased each year.

It is estimated that one out of every five children will be abused or neglected by the time he or she turns 18.

Thousands of children in Michigan become victims of abuse and neglect each year, reports Katie Smith, Recipient Rights Advisor at Northpointe Behavioral Healthcare Systems in Kingsford.

How you can help?

Smith offers 10 ways to help prevent child abuse.

1. Be a nurturing parent. Children need to know that they are special, loved and capable of following their dreams.

2. Help a friend, neighbor or relative. Being a parent isn't easy. Offer a helping hand take care of children so the parent(s) can rest or spend time together.

3. Help yourself. When the big and little problems of your everyday life pile up to the point you feel overwhelmed and out of control — take time out. Don't take it out on your kid.
4. If your baby cries. It can be frustrating to hear your baby cry. Learn what to do if your baby won't stop crying. Never shake a baby — shaking a child may result in severe injury or death.
5. Get involved. Ask you community leaders, clergy, library and schools to develop services to meet the needs of healthy children and families.
6. Help to develop parenting resources at your local library. Let your library you are in interested in parenting resources.
7. Promote programs in schools. Teaching children, parents and teachers prevention strategies can help to keep children safe.
8. Monitor your child's television and video viewing. Watching violent films and TV programs can harm young children.
9. Volunteer at a local child abuse prevention program. For information about volunteer opportunities, call 1-800-CHILDREN.
10. Report suspected abuse or neglect. If you have reason to believe a child has been or may be harmed, call your local department of children and family services or your local police department.

If you would like more information of how you can help prevent child abuse and neglect call the Iron-Dickinson Children's Advocacy Network at (906) 875-0604.

To show your support for preventing child abuse and neglect, wear a blue ribbon during the month of April.

If you want to show your support financially, check off on the Children's Trust Fund on your state of Michigan tax return.



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Published April 6, 2007

Authorities still investigating shooting of teen

By Nicole Geary
Lansing State Journal

Ingham County prosecutors likely won't decide before Monday whether to issue charges against a 15-year-old boy in Tuesday's shooting death of his 14-year-old foster brother.

Chief Assistant Prosecutor Linda Maloney said her office needs more time to go over information from the police investigation.

Lansing police have said three foster brothers were in an apartment at 319 E. Hillsdale St. near downtown Lansing when the shooting occurred close to 3 p.m. Tuesday.

Investigators, who have not released the boys' names, were trying to determine whether the shooting was an accident or intentional.

Police said the victim's 15-year-old foster brother was being held at a youth home Wednesday.

No additional details were available Thursday, and Maloney would not comment further on the case.

In general, juveniles must have a preliminary hearing within 24 hours of being detained, said James Pettibone, family court unit chief for the Ingham County prosecutor's office.

However, he said, court rules allow for a five-day extension to review evidence when the potential offense is very serious.

Pettibone would not comment specifically on Tuesday's shooting.

Contact Nicole Geary at 377-1066 or ngeary@lsj.com.

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Man says sister stabbed him

She claims she was holding knife and brother fell on her

By Michael P. McConnell
Daily Tribune Staff Writer

FERNDALE -- A Ferndale woman's brother testified Thursday that she stabbed him in the chest with a 10-inch kitchen knife during an argument over her boyfriend.

Leslee M. Whitmer, 33, is charged with assault with intent to cause great bodily harm less than murder and is jailed in lieu of a \$40,000 cash bond.

At her preliminary examination Thursday in Ferndale 43rd District Court, her brother, Douglas Whitmer, said his sister was in the kitchen of the house where they live with their mother cooking food about 2:30 a.m. on March 9.

"We had an argument over her boyfriend," he said, adding that he didn't like the boyfriend who had been hanging around the house. "I was stabbed; it happened so fast."

Leslee Whitmer appeared distraught in court and cried at one point.

Her brother testified he was stabbed in the right side of his chest and suffered a collapsed lung for which he was hospitalized for a week.

Police said both of the siblings had been drinking that night.

Douglas Whitmer called a friend to drive him to St. John Oakland Hospital in Madison Heights after the stabbing, police said. The hospital called police to investigate after he showed up at the hospital, police said. Police went to the hospital and the house on Garfield.

"The suspect said she was holding a knife and he basically fell on top of her, like it was an accident," said Ferndale Detective Brendan Moore. "But you don't put a knife to someone's chest, threaten them and stab them by accident."

However, under questioning by Leslee Whitmer's attorney, her brother admitted he had assaulted his sister in the past.

After Thursday's hearing Judge Joseph Longo ordered the defendant to stand trial in Oakland County Circuit Court.

Contact Michael P. McConnell at mike.mcconnell@dailytribune.com or at (248) 571-2571.

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http://www.dailytribune.com/stories/040607/loc_stab001.shtml

Students raise awareness of sexual assault

By MIRIAM MOELLER, Journal Staff Writer

MARQUETTE — To raise awareness over sexual assaults and abuse, a Northern Michigan University student group plans to “Take Back the Night” next week.

“April is Sexual Abuse Awareness Month,” said organizer Becky Paris, an NMU sophomore and member of NMU’s National Panhellenic Conference. “We’re bringing in speakers from Florida ... basically to raise awareness about sexual abuse and domestic violence. It happens anywhere and everywhere; it’s not just a big city problem.”

Paris is a member of Phi Sigma Sigma, one of the sororities — the others are Alpha Gamma Delta and Alpha Xi Delta — that comprise the NMU group. The 60 women of these sororities are bringing speakers Kelly Addington and Becca Tieder to NMU’s Jamrich Hall 103 for the main event at 7 p.m. Thursday.

“Kelly and Becca, they travel all over the country, talking about sexual abuse and how you can prevent it,” Paris said.

The duo will present a program encouraging students to talk openly about sex and sexual assault on campus and how to seek solutions.

“After the speaker we’re going to have a candle vigil to remember those who have suffered from sexual abuse and violence,” Paris said.

The vigil will be held in the academic mall, followed by a “speak-out” session. Students will read excerpts from the book “Voices of Courage,” which includes stories about people who have been raped or sexually abused, Paris said.

The event is not just for women — men need support too, she said. According to Paris, statistics say one out of four women and one out of 12 men are sexually abused at some time in their lives.

She said she also hopes that the event will raise some awareness among male students about what constitutes sexual assault and how to prevent it.

“This is our first (event) and we hope to make it an annual event after this year,” Paris said. “Basically we’re targeting all of Northern’s student body and members of the community are more than welcome.”

The event is free for NMU students and \$1 for others. Money raised by the event will be donated to the “Take Back the Night” organization and Marquette’s Harbor House Domestic Abuse Shelter.

For more information, contact Paris at 235-2459.

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Diversion program finding some success

By JOHN EBY / Dowagiac Daily News
Thursday, April 5, 2007 10:52 AM EDT

CASSOPOLIS - It's called a Community Restorative Board (CRB), and Cass County's started three months ago.

CRB is a diversion program offering an alternative to formal court proceedings for juveniles who commit minor crimes.

Not only does this approach discourage low-risk, first-time offenders from committing further crimes and save money for an overburdened court system, but the panel provides cost-effective service opportunities for citizens of all ages, genders and races.

Cass County modeled its program after Berrien County, whose Balanced and Restorative Justice (BARJ) accomplished more than 13,000 hours of community service between June 2001 and July 2005 and won state recognition in 2004.

Berrien boards had seen 125 juveniles and collected 95 percent of \$18,000 restitution during that four-year period.

Elvin Gonzalez, Berrien County Trial Court Family Division administrator, told Cass County officials in July 2005 that BARJ in Berrien County was sparked by the Neighborhood Watch Association, which wanted to stem a rash of auto thefts.

Gonzalez described BARJ as an umbrella from which mentoring is a raindrop that could roll off. Cass County also has a mentoring program.

Even after a year, 93 percent of Berrien participants had not "reoffended." Cass has had one experience with recidivism.

Cass County has trained five volunteers and seen about a dozen juvenile court referrals processed by the CRB, which meets Tuesday evenings at a Cassopolis church. The next one is at 5 p.m. April 10.

Coordinator Erica Boulanger said CRB hopes to eventually train 15 to 20 volunteer restorative board facilitators, with the next training scheduled for 4:30 to 8:30 p.m. on Wednesday, May 2, at the 1899 courthouse.

Boulanger describes CRB as a unique and rewarding volunteer opportunity to be directly involved in working with young people

Participate as a panel member with other volunteers, working with juvenile offenders as a representative of your community.

Help empower juvenile offenders to be accountable for their actions and make reparations to victims and the community.

Take part in this innovative countywide initiative involving referrals from schools, law enforcement agencies, juvenile court administrator Leigh Rogner and the prosecutor's office.

"We're really fortunate to have the supportive group we have now who feel like it's making a difference" with the 15- and 16-year-olds who have been referred, Boulanger said Wednesday.

She can be reached at 445-4456 for registration information. April 25 is the registration deadline.

Cases have included shoplifting at Martin's, eggings and the theft of road signs.

A teen who took signs heard from the Road Commission about the dangers and costs associated with what probably seemed like a harmless prank.

"He walked out saying he never realized stealing a sign can affect so many people," Boulanger recalled. "We don't want them to feel we're there to throw stuff at them," but to nip their transgressions in the bud before they fall farther afoul of

the law by showing how their actions affect others and their community at large.

Once the panel is completed satisfactorily, the offense is expunged from their record.

Boulanger said restitution generally results in being assigned to 15 to 20 hours of community service and writing an apology letter to the victim, who is welcome to participate with the CRB, but haven't so far.

Averaging four panels per month, the CRB usually operates with three to four people, but has gone with as few as two and sometimes more.

The idea is for a community panel to meet with the offender, the offender's parents and the victims.

Parents often remark, "That's not the story I got" initially from their child.

The group works together to craft an agreement guiding the offender in making amends to the victim and the community.

Goal of the meeting is to reach an agreement that holds the offender accountable for the offense balanced against the needs of the victim and community.

Boulanger is in the process of scheduling several more CRBs, which can accommodate two cases per meeting.

Outlets benefiting from the community service sentences include libraries, parks departments, camps, stables, the Council on Aging, Dowagiac Police Athletic League (PAL) and, when weather improves, Habitat for Humanity.

One offender was allowed to use his talents making scenery and props for a school play.

Boulanger's group has also been consulting Citizens Mediation Services Inc., a St. Joseph-based community dispute resolution program, to insure Cass County's CRB doesn't fizzle out when its three-year Building Restorative Communities grant ends in November.

Detroit Free Press
April 6, 2007

HARRISON TOWNSHIP: Second-graders to raise money for needy people

Second-graders at South River Elementary plan to raise money through a community service soup bowl project from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. April 20 to alleviate hunger and help needy families in Macomb County.

Hand-made bowls will be given to those who make a donation of \$10 or more for the luncheon.

For more information, contact Charlene Barrett at barrech@lc-ps.org.

April 5, 2007

AFFECTED GROUPS AWAIT DETAILS, LOB CRITICISM

Details were wanting in the House Democratic budget plan announced Thursday as groups who could be affected by the still-developing proposal sought to determine how and the extent to which they could be affected, and some lobbed criticism at the proposal.

A number of groups raised concerns that the proposal, at its best, would leave them no better off than they are now and, at its worst, could end up costing them money both up front and down the road.

Al Short, director of government affairs for the Michigan Education Association, said he needed more details, but added from what he knows, it was “not very well thought out.” He also questioned the estimated savings, and noted whatever amount it is would occur at the local, not state, level.

Part of Mr. Dillon’s proposal that would ask public sector employees to contribute 2 percent of their wages toward their retirement health care benefit costs worried Alan Kilar, financial secretary and treasurer for the United Auto Workers Local 6000. He said state employees have done a lot to help the state and he’s wondering when “others are going to pony up their share.”

He said state workers have continually given back to help the state budget crisis by not taking more money or taking time off.

“State workers have given and given,” Mr. Kilar said. “Case loads have gone up and they’re doing more with less, there’s not much more we can ask of them.”

Mr. Kilar said if state employees want to contribute the 2 percent it would be their choice and said they have worked hard to reduce health care costs and are willing to do more but doesn’t think it’s going to do much to help the budget.

“I don’t think they’re going to balance the state budget on state employee health care,” Mr. Kilar said.

The 2 percent contribution would have to be negotiated as part of the contracts with the state and could be discussed, but Mr. Kilar said the contracts were negotiated in good faith and they expect the state to live up to those agreements.

“It’s a big topic and there are very sketchy details and we need a lot more detail to make that something to consider or to make it work,” Mr. Short said. He said the state would see savings only if it declared it would reduce funding for schools by the total amount it expects could be reduced by the 2 percent contribution plan, and even that would be hard to equitably implement given the factors involved in each district’s retiree health care plans.

“That’s a concept that we’ve talked about in the past,” said Don Wotruba with the Michigan Association of School Boards. “It’s a good idea if we are going to continue to provide health care for retirees.”

The outstanding question is whether the 2 percent will actually cover the cost of the benefit, Mr. Wotruba said.

But he also noted that, under current case law, health care benefits are not a guaranteed part of an employee’s retirement. “As soon as we start requiring them to pay, it becomes a guaranteed benefit,” he said. “I hope that we will always offer health care to our retirees” but right now it is a cost to cut if needed.

Local government and school officials continued to say they are already doing some consolidation of services, and, while there may be room for more, the return on some of those changes may be questionable.

“Our members have been consolidating and sharing services,” said Summer Minnick with the Michigan Municipal League.

David Bertram, legislative liaison for the Michigan Townships Association, questioned whether the elections, assessing and tax collection services townships provide could be better performed at the county level. And if the plan would force that move, rather than encourage voluntary consolidation, he said, “that’s a pretty radical idea.”

Smaller townships are already in many cases sharing some of the services, such as assessors, and some supervisors pull double duty by performing that function, he said. How consolidating those functions to a governmental level that is not experienced at doing them would save money is problematic, Mr. Bertram said, because the work still has to be done. “It’s pretty fixed,” he said of the costs.

Mr. Short also said consolidating services to the intermediate districts could take years to implement, with again, any savings occurring at the local level.

At the House Education Committee meeting Thursday morning, before Mr. Dillon’s plan was announced, Tom White, executive director of the Michigan School Business Officials, said much of the savings that can be had from consolidation of services has occurred.

MSBO is part of the Michigan School Energy Cooperative that allows districts to seek power from competitive providers as well as part of a school bus purchasing cooperative that allows districts to purchase buses under pre-negotiated prices. And he said many districts have developed their own purchasing cooperatives for other goods.

But he said proposals like combining human resources or business manager functions would not save as much as some might hope because of the different contracts, budgets and calendars at each school district.

“There are probably moderate savings to be had with this,” he said of service consolidation.

Mr. White also argued some of the focus on consolidation has been wrong. “To save dollars, to have that as our sole goal would be sorely misguided,” he said. Schools should be focused first on improving education, he said.

Mike Hansen, director of the Michigan Community College Association, said community college support for the plan to implement a one-mill property tax for his members would depend in some part on the purpose of the tax.

“If this is new money to support community colleges we would be totally supportive of that,” Mr. Hansen said. He said the group would be more hesitant, and could oppose the plan, if the new tax simply replaces general fund support.

The plan announced Thursday also does not indicate how the money would be distributed, he said.

The proposal also could affect the tuition colleges charge, Mr. Hansen said. With all residents now paying something directly to support community colleges, they may expect reductions in out-of-district tuition in exchange, he said.

William Lobenherz, president of the Michigan Soft Drink Association, sharply criticized the proposed sales tax on soft drinks, calling it discriminatory and regressive as its harshest impact falls on the poor and children. “We were frankly very surprised that someone looking for new tax revenues would pick such a source which is well recognized as harshly regressive. That’s why the people voted to take the sales tax off of food in the first place,” he said. He also said it is a slippery slope that could take the state down the road of imposing the tax on other food products.

Ms. Minnick said cities and villages would absolutely oppose the plan to eliminate the industrial and commercial personal property tax without some guarantee the money would be replaced.

“We would be open to something that was a constitutional amendment that would guarantee that locals are held harmless,” she said. Otherwise, “that’s another \$350 million for cities and villages at risk through the appropriations process and that’s not something that we’re supportive of.”

Tom Hickson of the Michigan Association of Counties said his members are primarily concerned with public safety – mostly surrounding the unspecified changes in corrections policies to save \$122 million – and the financial impact on counties with the elimination of personal property taxes. But he also expressed a willingness to look at where efficiencies can be accomplished.

For the latter, he said, “The question is when you replace it, is it something that we have to ask the Legislature for our money? That’s not a formula that has worked well in the past.”

Mr. Kilar was also skeptical of a part of Mr. Dillon’s plan that would look at the wages and benefits of state workers in comparison to other states and the private sector, saying a similar study had been done before. He also said it was hard to compare the jobs in the state to other states because many of the positions are unique to the state.

Mr. Wotruba questioned the need for a \$350,000 study when a variety of groups publish annual reports on teacher salaries. "I'd rather have \$350,000 to do an adequacy study (of school funding levels)," he said.

Others however were happy to see the state looking at reforming or changing state employee benefits.

Todd Anderson, vice president of government relations for the Small Business Association of Michigan, said SBAM needs more details on what exactly would happen under the plan but said the organization is interested in getting rid of the personal property tax and finding a fair replacement.

"Some of the business tax ideas are promising and they require further evaluation," Mr. Anderson said.

He said they're glad to be part of the plan that would call for some spending cuts and reform to state employee health care and are waiting to hear more information on what kind of replacement would be offered for the Single Business Tax and the personal property tax.

"We're glad the House is in the debate and we're waiting for a resolution," Mr. Anderson said. "We expect there's going to be a SBT replacement and we're anxious for the Senate and House to work together on this."

Mr. Wotruba said he expected a similar reaction to the plan to put Ipods in every classroom, at a cost of some \$38 million, to the reaction to the salary study. While he said there could be a valid educational use for the music and video players ("(Teachers) watch the kids walk down the hall with Ipods. They know it's a tool they use."), but he said it would only cost some \$11 million to make up the at-risk funding increases that have been foregone in recent years.

Observer and Eccentric Newspapers

Letters

April 6, 2007

Cuts burden most vulnerable

In her recent letter to the Editor, Valerie Earle was obviously pleased with Rep. John Pastor and his pledge to not support tax increases. However, she went too far when she suggested that he said, "What we are all thinking." Some of her facts were also wrong.

Mrs. Earle made the claim that people are "crossing the state line" into Michigan because "Michigan is one of the only states in the country with NO waiting period to get on our welfare rolls". The fact is, "welfare" as she calls it, is a federal program and NO STATE has a waiting period. Perhaps Mrs. Earle is not aware that since the 1996 welfare reform, cash welfare cases in Michigan have declined over 60 percent, only increasing recently as unemployment in Michigan has risen to a national high.

Because of our declining revenues and the resistance of legislators like Rep. Pastor to support the Governor's proposal, additional belts will certainly be tightened as Mrs. Earle hopes. Sadly, belt tightening will come in the form of cuts in foster care payments, cuts in services to senior citizens, cuts to day care for the working poor, and cuts in Medicaid payments to hospitals and other providers.

In other words, Michigan's most vulnerable citizens will continue to carry the burden.

Marie Tolen

Livonia